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New York State's Alternate Assessment: Is It Really Fulfilling Its Purpose?

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New York State's Alternate Assessment:
Is It Really Fulfilling Its Purpose?

By
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A thesis submitted to the

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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New York State's Alternate Assessment:

Is It Really Fulfilling Its Purpose?

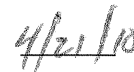
by

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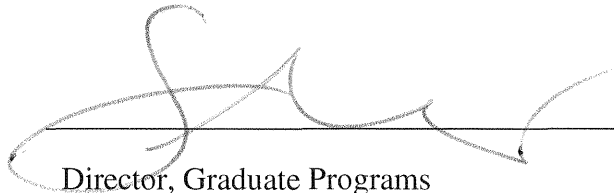
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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review	4
Influence on instruction planning	4
Influence on IEP development	6
Training	8
Validity	9
Chapter Three: Methods	13
Chapter Four: Results	17
Chapter Five: Discussion and conclusions	29
References	36
Appendix A	39
Appendix B	42
Appendix C	44
Appendix D	46

List of illustrations

Figure 1. Teacher responses to survey question number one 17

Figure 2. Teacher responses to survey question number two 18

Figure 3. Teacher responses to survey question number three 18

Figure 4. Teacher responses to survey question number four 19

Figure 5. Teacher responses to survey question number five 19

Figure 6. Teacher responses to survey question number six 20

Figure 7. Teacher responses to survey question number seven 20

Figure 8. Teacher responses to survey question number eight 21

Figure 9. Teacher responses to survey question number nine 22

Table 1. Teacher responses to survey question number ten 23

Chapter One: Introduction

After the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, all states were required to ensure that students with disabilities be included in state and local assessments for measurements of accountability. The Center for Policy Options (1993) define education accountability as “a systematic method to assure those inside and outside the educational system that schools are moving in desired directions” (as cited in Thurlow et al., 1998, p.2). The same amendments also stated that students with disabilities were to participate in those assessments with appropriate accommodations. One specific accommodation that is commonly referred to as the ultimate accommodation is an alternate assessment. An alternate assessment is only administered to students who are unable to participate in the general assessment system, even with appropriate accommodations. It was required that all states were implementing their own alternate assessment by the year 2000. Kentucky was the first state to create and administer an alternate assessment. Since states have the ability to create their own alternate assessments there are a variety of different formats that are used. The different forms of alternate assessments include things like portfolios, checklists, and performance assessments. New York State uses a portfolio approach. New York State also defines a student with severe disabilities as a person who has “limited cognitive abilities combined with behavioral and/or physical limitations and who require highly specialized education and/or social, psychological, and medical services in order to maximize their full potential for useful and meaningful participation in society and for self-fulfillment.” The datafolio as New York State calls the portfolio assessment includes things like a student page containing information about the student, a

parent/family/guardian survey and teacher observed data from two or three days. The datafolio is put together in a binder by the classroom teacher.

Also under IDEA (1997) “to serve the purposes of assessment under title I, an alternate assessment must be aligned with the State’s content standards” (Perner 2007). To accommodate this requirement states, including New York, developed standards for the alternate assessment that resemble the state content standards. New York State calls these adapted standards AGLIs, or Alternate Grade-Level Indicators. The AGLIs range from less complex to more complex. The classroom teacher determines which AGLI to use depending on the specific student and their abilities. The teacher is also given sample assessment tasks to have the student complete under each AGLI. There is also a variety of assessment tasks to choose from. A teacher does have the ability to create their own task for the AGLI but that task then has to be approved by that specific schools’ alternate assessment advisor and then the graders of the assessment. If the task is not approved by the grader of the assessment, the student is penalized for it and he or she receives an incomplete. For each AGLI a teacher is required to take three days of data and provide evidence through video tapes, photographs or a witness of those completed tasks.

Regardless of the severity of the disability a student is assessed in certain subjects according to his or her birthday. For example if a student’s birthday falls between September 1, 2000 and August 31, 2001 that student falls in the third grade range during the 2009-2010 alternate assessment. That student is then assessed in ELA and mathematics, just like a typical third grader.

All students are graded on their level of independence with the task and their level of accuracy. To determine the level of independence for an assessment task the teacher is to count the number of times the student does the task without prompting. Accuracy is the number of times a student has the correct response out of the total number of expected responses.

The final step of the assessment is to send the datafolio away to a regional scoring center where a qualified scorer will score the datafolios. When the scorer scores the datafolios that scorer is looking at things like the appearance of the datafolio, the completion of the datafolio, whether or not the teacher chose the correct tasks to have the student complete and the students' level of accuracy and independence. Teachers do receive grades back for the datafolios. The grade sheet is a single piece of paper explaining whether or not a student received credit for their student information page, the parent survey, whether each task was appropriate, and whether the teachers' assessment of their levels of accuracy and independence were correct. The grade sheets may also contain another sheet with small explanations on it explaining why things were incorrect.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to show that the New York State Alternate Assessment is not a useful tool for teachers as they plan classroom instruction. A student with severe disabilities is a very broad term. A student with a severe disability can be a student who is in an academic based classroom or a functional daily living skills classroom. A student with severe disabilities can be verbal or non-verbal. In my own classroom we focus on daily functional living skills. We focus on these skills because of the severity of my students' disabilities. My students do however have to take the academically based New York State Alternate Assessment. The NYS Alternate Assessment focuses on the skills my students do not necessary have instead of the skills they do have. The research on alternate assessments has dramatically increased since the passing of IDEA and the No Child Left Behind Act. Common reoccurring themes in those articles of research include the influence the alternate assessments have on instructional planning and Individualized Educational Plan or IEP development, the need for more training, and the validity of the assessment.

Influence on instructional planning

“The critical purpose of any assessment system is to inform instructional practices,” (Johnson & Arnold, 2007, p. 29). Teachers use different forms of assessments for students to demonstrate understanding of content and to develop skills. They take the results from those assessments to better their instructional practices. Many researchers feel that “a major outcome of the alternate assessment should be to improve the quality of our programs for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” (Perner, 2007,

p. 249). Kampfer et al. (2001) found that one of the critical variables in determining how well students scored on the Kentucky alternate assessment was whether or not the teacher incorporated the alternate assessment material into daily instruction. The researchers found a positive correlation between students' scores and instructional integration of the portfolio standards. The researchers also note that integration into instruction also makes the alternate assessment more valid. Kleinert et al. (2002) received similar results. "A far more powerful predictor of student scores was the extent to which the alternate assessment was integrated into daily instruction..." (p.40, as cited in Perner, 2007).

Flowers et al. (2005) found that the format of the alternate assessment might also have something to do with how influential the results may be toward instructional practice. The researchers found that teachers who used a checklist approach spent an average of 2.9 hours completing an AA as opposed to a teacher using the portfolio approach who spent 58.1 hours completing the AA. The teachers who used the checklist approach also agreed more frequently that the AA resulted in "improvement in instructional practices, use of functional curriculum content, promotion of students' self-determination, and improvement in the quality of IEPs" (Flowers et al., 2005, p. 89). Browder et al. (2003) (as cited in Towles-Reeves et al., 2009) also recognized the importance of daily integration by recommending that a format for alternate assessments be developed that can produce data to influence instructional decisions. Although the researchers note that this concept is of importance, there has been no research to investigate how this may be accomplished for students with severe disabilities.

One reoccurring theme found in alternate assessment research was the idea that the perceived importance of an alternate assessment may also have an effect on how

much influence teachers feel its results have on daily instruction. Towles-Reeves and Kleinert (2003) administered a study to investigate the impact of one states alternate assessment upon instruction and IEP development. They found that 44% of the teachers surveyed felt that the alternate assessment had a positive impact on daily instruction. The researchers also noted in their study that this state's alternate assessment was not considered "high-stakes" for students or schools. In other words, there are no consequences for low scores or rewards for high scores. The researchers of this study make the assumption that if the assessment was considered a "high-stakes" assessment teachers may have perceived it as more positively influencing instruction. If teachers feel that the results of the alternate assessment have no effect on accountability at the school or classroom level there might be less motivation for teachers to incorporate this material into daily instruction.

Influence on IEP Development

When working with students with severe disabilities a student's Individualized Education Plan, or IEP, can tell you a great deal of information about that student. An IEP is developed as soon as a student is diagnosed with a disability. It contains things like the student's current functional and academic levels, measurable annual goals, and a list of services that need to be provided to the student to ensure that he or she receives a proper education. The IEP is developed by a number of people including special education teachers, general education teachers, and parents. "The IEP is the cornerstone of the program for every student with disabilities" (Kleinert, 2002, p.41). The Division on Developmental Disabilities and others in the same field have found that states that give students assessments that do not directly link with the student's IEP or standards

relevant to the student receive discouraging results (Perner, 2007). By the year 2009 there have been a total of five studies conducted in the area of the link between IEPs and alternate assessments. In all five of those studies the results have revealed a lack of a connection between the two (Towles-Reeves et al, 2009). Thompson et al. (2001) thoroughly investigated the IEP forms for 41 states. Their goal was to determine if state IEP forms included content standards or curriculum expectations (as cited in Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). They found that very few states even mentioned anything about state standards on their IEP forms. The importance of the development of standards-based IEPs is noted in many alternate assessment studies (Browder et al., 2005; Kleinert et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2001; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). Standards-based IEPs would create a link between a student's everyday work and a standards-based alternate assessment. Creating a link between the alternate assessment and the IEP would also allow for parental involvement. Through the process of creating standards-based IEPs parents and teachers would be able to learn how academic content standards can be individualized for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Another way to link the IEP with alternate assessments would be to allow the IEP team to determine the specific items on the assessment (Browder 200). Since the IEP is the cornerstone of a student with disabilities' education, it is important for the assessment items to be applicable to each individual student. By using the IEP team to help create an alternate assessment, this also gives parents the opportunity to give input and express their expectations for their child in reading, math, and science. Browder et al. (2005) also noted that if IEPs were standards-based the tracking of IEP goal progress would overlap with alternate assessment requirements. This overlap might decrease the amount of time and

paperwork required for alternate assessment administration and make the alternate assessment more relevant to the students' goals.

Training

Another major issue related to alternate assessment research is the need for training. Research has shown how important it is that students with severe disabilities be exposed to content on the assessment during daily instruction (Kampfer et al., 2001). However, Browder et al. (2005) (as cited in Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Muhomba, 2009) suggest that large amounts of training is necessary for teachers to be able to teach and assess students with significant disabilities in math, science, and language arts. Perner (2007) suggested that teacher training should include methods and techniques in incorporating alternate assessments and content standards into daily instruction in classrooms with students diagnosed with the most severe cognitive disabilities. Kampfer et al. (2001) found that most teachers surveyed appreciated and benefited from training sessions intended to help incorporate the alternate assessment into daily instruction. Browder et al. (2005) also found that when teachers received training on how to incorporate alternate assessment into daily instruction students' scores improved.

Many researchers have also found that alternate assessments are more of a hassle for teachers because of the time involved in completing them. Kampfer et al. (2001) found that there was no correlation between the amount of time a teacher spent working on an alternate assessment and the grade that assessment received. Because of these findings, Flowers et al. (2005) suggests that teachers may need training in efficiency. That training should include things like time-saving organizational skills. Kampfer et al.

(2001) also notes that teacher training could be check in with teachers on their progress. Training should be used as a support for teachers who may be struggling with the alternate assessment process.

As mentioned prior, research has shown how important it is to involve IEP's when administering an alternate assessment. Since a student's IEP is their education plan it is important for IEP teams to develop standards-based IEPs that are linked to their specific grade-level content standards (Thompson et al., 2001, as cited in Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). By developing IEPs in this manner, teachers and parents can see how academic content standards can be appropriately individualized for each student.

Validity

One issue that is commonly looked at in research involving alternate assessments is the issue of their validity. From a teacher's point of view, when analyzing poor alternate assessment results we ask the question what may have caused this? Did the student not meet the standard because of poor performance? Did the student not meet the standard because of poor instruction? Did the student not meet the standard because of poor portfolio quality? Were the assessment tasks not appropriate for the student? Or, was it a combination of factors? Numerous studies (Browder et al., 2003, 2005; Flowers et al., 2005; Johnson & Arnold, 2004, 2007; Kleinert et al, 1999, 2002; Perner, 2007; Towles-Reeves & Harold, 2006; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009; Turner et al., 2000; Ysseldyke & Olsen, 1999) have called into question the validity of states' alternate assessments

Many times the validity of the alternate assessments are not addressed adequately because the “assumption is made that tasks are automatically valid since they supposedly are drawn from actual criterion performances” (Coutinho & Malouf, 1993, p.67, as cited in Turner et al., 2000, p.70). One factor that may effect the validity of alternate assessments is the pressure to align state content standards with performance indicators on the alternate assessment. “Recent research examining the content of alternate assessments has shown that many AAs may suffer from poor content validity by forcing alignment to the general education standards” (Johnson & Arnold, 2007, p.24). Researchers have also questioned how well some states are aligning their alternate achievement standards with state content standards or even performance tasks with alternate achievement standards. Browder et al. (2005) even recommend that content area specialists and special education teachers review performance indicators to make sure that they are all conceptually sound and appropriate for the population of students that the alternate assessment is intended for.

Lane (1999) determined that two factors establish the validity of alternate assessments (a) how well the assessment reflects the state’s content standards and (b) how well the curriculum is aligned with the academic standards (as cited in Roach & Elliot, 2006). It is obvious that an assessment would appear more valid if it aligns with the curriculum. However, what about the students diagnosed with severe disabilities? As mentioned above some classrooms may be academic based while others may be functional skills based. Therefore in a classroom that is considered functional skills based, the New York State Alternate Assessment might appear less valid since it is primarily academic based. While examining information about the alternate assessments

of 42 states, Browder et al. (2005) found that most states measure academic contents such as reading and math, but only a few states assessed functional skills (as cited in Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). The researchers also noted the fact that there is a substantial amount of research on how to teach functional skills to students with severe disabilities, but very little research on how to teach academics to students with severe disabilities. If teachers are to teach what are students are being assessed on, “we may be inappropriately narrowing the curriculum for students with severe disabilities” (Johnson & Arnold, 2004).

Another reoccurring theme related to validity is, who is being assessed? Half of the states use a portfolio format for their alternate assessment. The portfolio, or datafolio as New York State calls it, is put together by the teacher. In a number of studies (Johnson & Arnold, 2007; Flowers et al., 2005; Johnson & Arnold, 2004; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009) results have called into question whether or not it is the teacher being assessed or the student. Authors have mentioned that a low score on the assessment could reflect the students’ lack of progress in that area, a teacher’s inability to assemble a portfolio, or maybe even both. Flowers et al. (2005) found that most teachers surveyed felt that their own knowledge of the alternate assessment most influenced their students’ outcomes. A student’s assessment results ultimately should also reflect the quality of the educational program the student is enrolled in. This is the where accountability comes in. As mentioned prior, teachers have often complained about the amount of time and effort that goes into completing an alternate assessment. What if some teachers are not willing to put forth the effort to create a portfolio that accurately portrays a student’s program? Now, due to the teacher’s lack of effort, the student and ultimately the program receive a

poor grade. How do we know if a portfolio grade accurately represents the program quality a student is receiving (Turner et al., 2000)?

Chapter Three: Methods

Participants

The survey portion of the current study took place at three Western New York schools for students with disabilities. This is a convenience sample. All three schools are composed of students with disabilities that make them unable to attend a typical school district. The students enrolled in these schools range in age from birth to age 21. Although these students are classified on their IEPs as having multiple disabilities their academic lives range from a academic to focusing on functional daily living skills regardless of age. For example, there are third grade age level students working on things like math and social studies while students who are 18 to 21 may be working on things like socialization rather than academic skills. The classrooms at the school are typically arranged by students' ability levels and age. In most classrooms students are no more than three years apart from one another.

The participants in the current study were the special education teachers employed at the three schools. The ages and races of most of the participants are unknown because it is not an important component for the current study. All participants do have at least their teacher certification in special education. Also, all participants have previously administered the NYS Alternate Assessment.

For the interview portion of this study, from my own experience and the recommendation of one schools alternate assessment advisor, I chose four teachers to interview that all have students at different academic levels. These four teachers specifically were chosen to obtain the opinions of teachers in classrooms of all different

academic levels. The school's academic advisor is someone who goes to training every year for the alternate assessment. The advisor also usually has experience in grading the alternate assessment. It is the job of the alternate assessment advisor to provide training to the teachers in regards to the alternate assessment. The alternate assessment advisor also has the job of looking over the datafolios before they are sent for grading. The experience of each teacher was taken into account when choosing teachers to interview. All four teachers interviewed are from one of the three schools surveyed. This is a convenience sample. Three of the teachers are female, one is a male and all have been teaching for over four years. Teacher A is currently a teacher in an academic based classroom. Her students range in age from eight to eleven. Teacher B is a teacher in a daily-living skills based classroom. His students range in age from ten to thirteen. Teacher C is currently teaching in a pre-emergent based classroom. Her students range in age from six to nine. Teacher D is currently teaching in a daily-living skills based classroom. Her students are between the ages of sixteen to twenty.

The role of the researcher is primarily data collection.

Instrumentation

The instruments used to collect data included a ten question survey (see Appendix A) sent to all of the teachers at the three schools and a seven question interview done with the four teachers at one of the schools. The ten question survey was designed on Surveymonkey.com and sent to all of the special education teachers at the three schools via email. The email was sent by the alternate assessment advisor for one of the three schools. The survey consisted of nine multiple choice questions and one short-answer

question. The teachers were given one month to complete the survey. The survey was completed and returned on time by twenty-two teachers.

The teacher interviews took place either before or after school in the offices of each of the four teachers interviewed. The interviewed teachers were asked seven questions (see Appendix B), and the interviews lasted from ten minutes to forty-five minutes. The teacher interviews were developed by the researcher in an attempt to hear possible explanations for some of the survey responses. The interviews allowed for teachers to expand on topics and were open-ended enough for teachers to expand on their thoughts.

Data Collection

The study took place over a month long period. The researcher allowed participants three weeks to complete the survey. After the third week another email was sent reminding the participants of the survey. A week after the second email was sent, the researcher collected the received data. Also in that month the researcher conducted the four interviews. In the email sent to the teachers with the survey, the consent form (see Appendix D) was attached for the participants to read. Prior to the interviews the researcher also read aloud and distributed the consent form for the interviews (see Appendix C).

Since the survey was designed using surveymonkey.com, this website collects responses and presents the results in a percentage form and a response count form. The website also displayed the amount of participants that answered each question and the amount that skipped each question. The website can also create a chart displaying the results for each question if you purchase the premium service.

The manner in which the researcher collected the data was best suited to answer the research questions posed in the present study.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the survey was collected by surveymonkey.com. The researcher used Microsoft Excel to create bar graphs of the already organized data collected from questions one through nine. Question ten was not included in this method of analysis because it was in the short-answer form. Each bar graph displays the number of teachers that responded to each of the solutions represented.

The interview responses and question number ten on the survey were analyzed together. The researcher looked for reoccurring themes and themes that tied into the topics used in the survey questions to analyze the data.

Chapter Four: Results

Surveys

Figures 1 through 9 represent the results of survey questions one through nine. The figures show the available solutions to each multiple choice question the teachers were given and how many teachers chose each solution. As you may recall, the purpose of the current study was to demonstrate that the New York State Alternate Assessment is not a useful tool in regards to instructional planning.

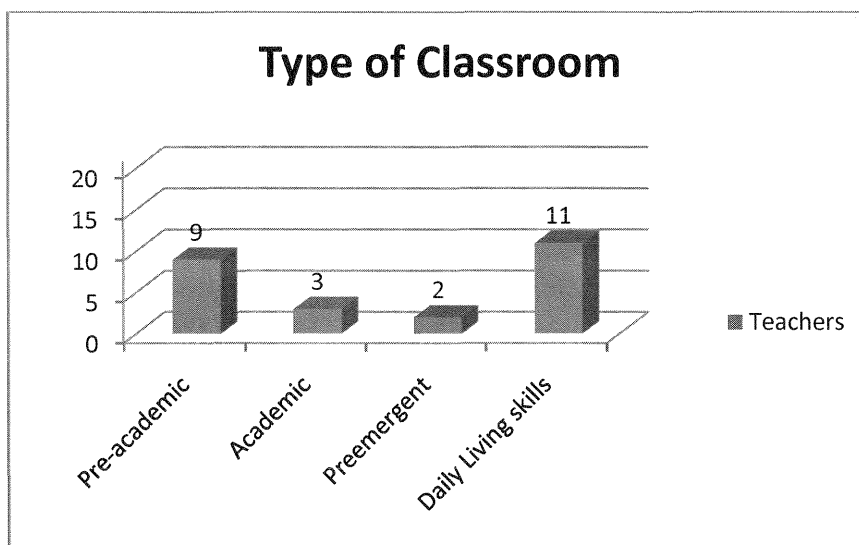


Figure 1. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: Which of the following best describes your classroom: Pre-academic, academic, pre-emergent, or daily-living skills?

Figure 1 demonstrates that majority of teachers surveyed teach in pre-academic and daily-living skills based classrooms.

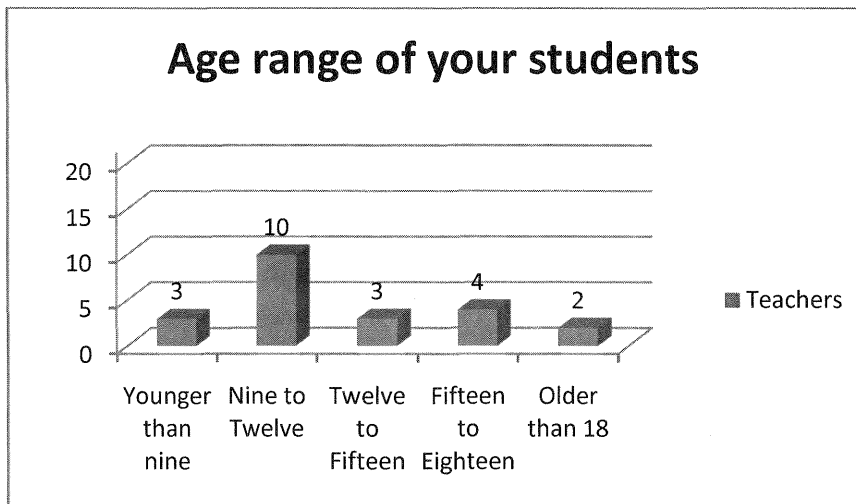


Figure 2. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: Which age range do your students fall in?

Figure 2 demonstrates that the majority of teachers surveyed teach students between the ages of nine and twelve. There were only two teachers surveyed that teach students older than eighteen.

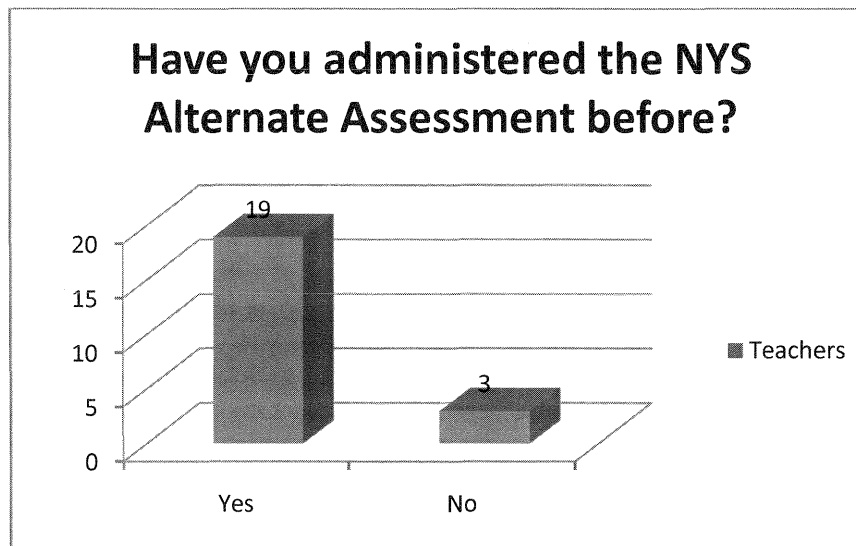


Figure 3. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: Have you administered the New York State Alternate Assessment before?

Figure 3 demonstrates that three of the twenty-two participants have not administered the New York State Alternate Assessment.

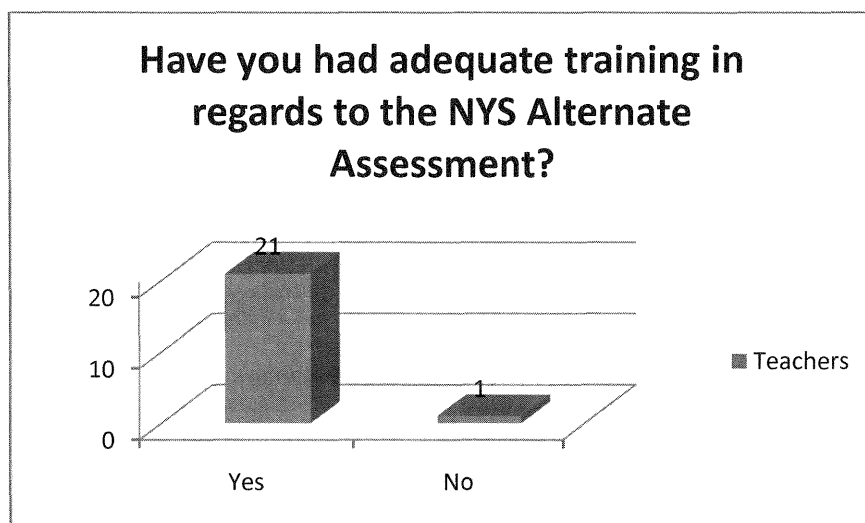


Figure 4. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: Do you feel you have had adequate training in regards to the New York State Alternate Assessment?

Figure 4 demonstrates that all of the teachers surveyed except for one felt that they have had adequate training in regards to the New York State Alternate Assessment.

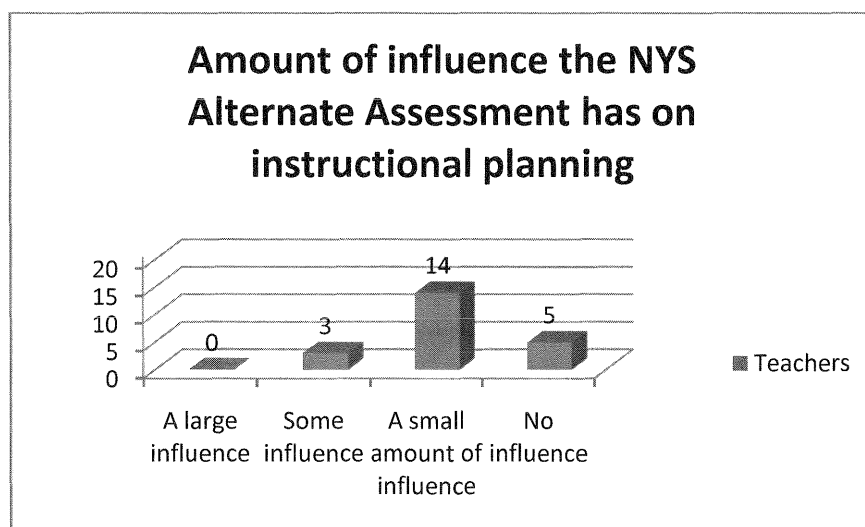


Figure 5. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: How much influence, if any, do you feel that the New York State Alternate Assessment has on instructional planning?

Figure 5 demonstrates that over half of the teachers surveyed felt that the New York State Alternate Assessment has a small amount of influence on instructional planning. None of the teachers surveyed felt that the Alternate Assessment has a large influence on

instructional planning. Five teachers felt that the assessment has no influence on their instructional planning.

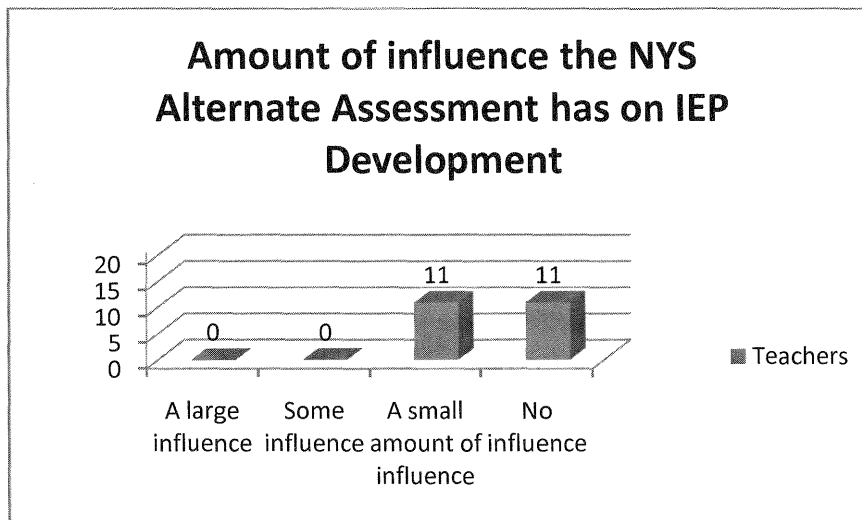


Figure 6. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: How much influence, if any, do you believe the New York State Alternate Assessment has on IEP development?

Figure 6 demonstrates that half of the teachers surveyed felt that the New York State Alternate Assessment has a small amount of influence on IEP development. The other half of the teachers surveyed felt that the assessment has no influence on IEP development.

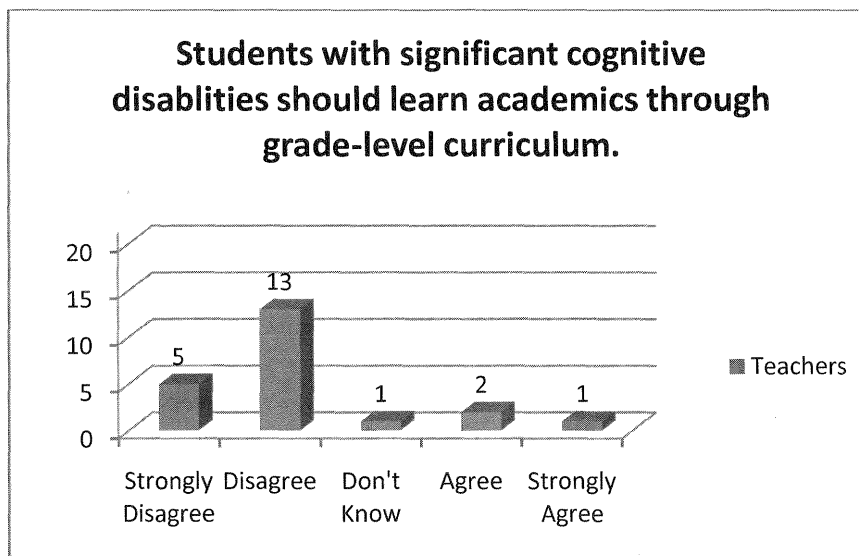


Figure 7. The bar graph represents the teacher agreement or disagreement of the following statement: Students with significant cognitive disabilities should learn academics through grade-level curriculum.

Figure 7 demonstrates that the majority of teachers surveyed disagreed with the statement, students with significant cognitive disabilities should learn academics through grade-level curriculum. Five of the teachers strongly disagreed with the statement. One teacher strongly agreed with the statement.

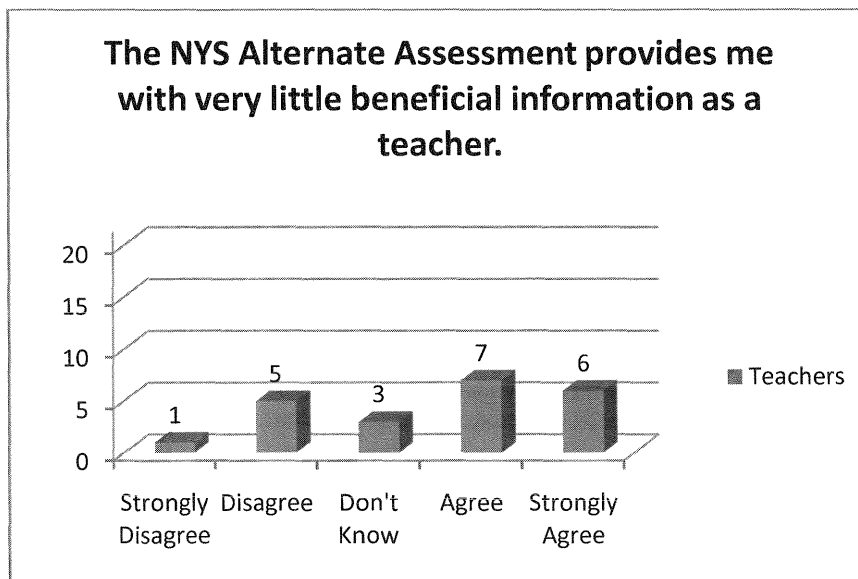


Figure 8. The bar graph represents the teacher agreement or disagreement of the following statement: The New York State Alternate Assessment provides me with very little beneficial information as a teacher.

Figure 8 demonstrates that the numbers of teachers were almost evenly distributed when asked to state their agreement or disagreement with the statement, the New York State Alternate Assessment provides me with very little beneficial information as a teacher. Seven teachers surveyed agreed with the statement. Six of the teachers strongly agreed with the statement. One teacher strongly disagreed with the statement.

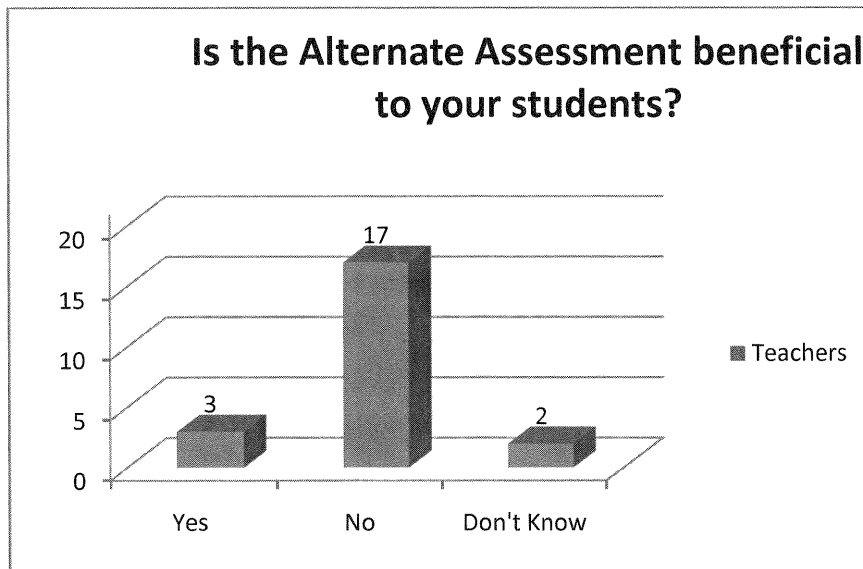


Figure 9. The bar graph represents the teacher responses to the question: Is the New York State Alternate Assessment beneficial to your students?

Figure 9 demonstrates teacher's answers to the questions, is the Alternate Assessment beneficial to your students? Figure 9 demonstrates that seventeen of the twenty-two teachers surveyed felt that the Alternate Assessment is not beneficial to their students. Three of the twenty-two teachers surveyed felt that the Alternate Assessment is beneficial to their students.

Table 1. displays teacher responses to question number ten on the survey. As you may recall, question number ten was, what are some changes that you would make to the Alternate Assessment if you could? Fourteen out of twenty-two respondents answered question number ten.

Table 1.

Table 1

Teacher responses to question number ten: What changes would you make to the New York State Alternate Assessment

Teacher	Response
1	"Provide more leave time support to teachers to complete them."
2	"Assessments need to be geared more to the daily skills being taught to students in correlation to their cognitive levels as well as their physical and social abilities. The assessment is not an accurate assessment of what students can actually do, it just demonstrates more of their delays."
3	"That when a child is in the 7th/8th/HS and has Severe-Profound MR / MA of 6 months-18 months should be released from Alt Assess - it is ridiculous for the government to say that they should be receiving programming that goes with the NYS curriculum - you would not expect a NORMAL child at 1 year of age to understand the ramifications of the 1920's on the future etc. - or magnetism or algebra and geometry?! Come on- sometimes it makes me so angry how disrespectful the process is to the children and the parents!"
4	"I would like to see the Alternate Assessment reflect who our students are and what they can do. It does not reflect any of our students' scatter

skills or skills they have that are not tested by the Alternate Assessment. Because of the way the Alternate Assessment is currently written, the students I work with require almost total physical assistance, so they score 1's for independence. I would like to see these multiply disabled students get credit for the things they can do, and find a way for it to be reflected in their scores. The tasks we are required to work on with our students often have nothing to do with what they will be doing once they graduate from our program. I feel it is wrong to take valuable time away from teaching these students daily living skills that they can use in adult programs, instead of NY State curriculum that they'll never use as adults.”

- 5 “more appropriate tasks for students with severe disabilities”
- 6 “too data drive, not relevant enough to population”
- 7 “Increased flexibility with the picking, wording, creation, and interpretation of AGLIs.”
- 8 “I would include arts and music in the assessment.”
- 9 “I would like to see AGLI's and sample assessment tasks which are more appropriate for the students in my classroom. For students who have significant cognitive, physical, communication, etc. challenges, this tool is irrelevant.”
- 10 “As a system, it is functional enough to remain the same overall.”
- 11 “I do not see any instructional/student benefits related to Alternate Assessment. It is just another task that needs to be completed with

	students and we move on with our day.”
12	“There should be more functional AGLIs so that we can match AGLIs to the IEPs”
13	“Teachers should receive datafolios back so they can see how the kids did.”
14	“Invite the writers to meet our students.”

Note. The table displays results of teacher responses to the question, what would you change about the New York State Alternate Assessment if you could.

Table 1 demonstrates that there were a few common themes in the fourteen answers to the question, what would you change about the New York State Alternate Assessment if you could? Teachers two, four, five, nine, and twelve all felt that the assessment does not reflect the skills that their students actually have or learn and is not appropriate for their students. Teacher eleven stated that he or she felt that the alternate assessment has no instructional/ student benefits. Teacher thirteen felt that New York State should return the datafolios so that teachers can see how the students did. Teacher ten said he or she would not change anything about the assessment.

Interviews

Common themes in the interview answers were present in a few of the teacher’s answers. The first common theme presented itself in question two, do you feel that the Alternate Assessment has an affect on your instructional planning? Teachers B, C, and D all felt that the only affect the Alternate Assessment has on instructional planning is the fact that it takes away from regular instruction. Teacher B explained that he probably spent 100 hours on alternate assessment work this school year. He told me that he felt that the New York State Alternate Assessment “eats time that you could have done

something else.” Teacher C explained that she felt that the alternate assessment has no affect on instructional planning. She also mentioned that students are constantly being pulled out of the classroom to complete the alternate assessment which causes them to miss valuable classroom instruction. Much like the responses of teachers B and C, teacher D felt that the alternate assessment takes time away from actual meaningful skills.

Common theme number two came from responses to question number five, how do the results of your students’ Alternate Assessments affect instruction, IEP development, planning? Teacher A responded to this question by explaining the fact that she felt that the teachers receive little to no feedback. She said that it is very difficult for the assessment to affect her planning or instruction with the amount of feedback received from the completed datafolios. Teacher C explained that in the six years she has administered the assessment she has never once been told to alter her instruction or administration procedures. She explained to me that she has also never been talked to about any problems she has had with grades before. Teacher D first told me that the results have no affect on instruction, IEP development, and/or planning. She explained that if she has ever gotten any feedback on her graded datafolios it has only been a few sentences. She felt that in order to get any feedback you have to either make a very large mistake or do something that stood out in a good way. She told me that she has never received feedback about individual tasks.

Question number six brought the third common theme of the four interviews. Question number six was, do you feel that your students should be taking the Alternate Assessment? Why or why not? Teacher A answered this question with, “most definitely.” She felt that for accountability reasons, students with severe disabilities

should be taking an assessment. Teacher C said yes and no. She explained to me that these students are in school and that school is a place to learn. She felt that in order to make these students accountable for what they learn in school there should be some form of assessment. She also felt however that standardized tests are not fitting for everyone, and they should be based on cognitive levels. Teacher D's answer to this question was much like teacher C's. She felt that her students should be taking some form of assessment. However, like teacher C, she felt that the New York State Alternate Assessment should be altered a bit to reflect the skills her students do have.

Answers to question number seven presented the last common theme of the interviews. Question seven was, what would the Alternate Assessment look like if you designed it? Teacher A explained that she felt the assessment should be more individualized and IEP driven. She talked about the variety of differences students in her classroom have and how the assessment is not meeting all of their needs. Teacher B talked about the alteration of the Alternate Grade-Level Indicators or AGLIs. He explained that the AGLIs need to "make sense." He said that if it were up to him he would reexamine the AGLIs and tasks to make sure they are appropriate for his particular population of students. He said he would like to see more on it like the goals he works on in this classroom with his students currently. Teacher C explained that if she developed the assessment it would be more IEP driven, and she would provide more options for teachers to choose from for possible tasks. She also felt that the datafolio should be students work from the whole school year. Like the other teachers, teacher D said she felt that the Alternate Assessment should be more personal. She said she would focus it more on student's likes and dislikes and strengths and weaknesses. She explained that she

felt the current assessment assesses unachievable skills for her students. She said her assessment would look more at “social skills, not social studies” and future skills her students would actually need and use.

Chapter Five: Discussion and conclusion

The main focus of this study was to demonstrate that the New York State Alternate Assessment is not a useful tool for instructional planning. The current study suggested that in all cases, it is not. As mentioned prior, the purpose of implementing an assessment is to use the results to improve teaching practices. The current study has suggested that the alternate assessment used by New York State is not fulfilling its purpose.

One result of the current study that was consistent with prior research (Kleinert et al., 1999) was the idea that students with significant cognitive disabilities should be assessed. Kleinert et al. found that although teachers displayed frustration with the alternate assessment procedures in their state, the majority of teachers felt that it was important for their students to be included in school and state accountability measures. These results are consistent with the responses to the teacher interviews in the current study. Although 19 out of 22 teachers surveyed either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea of their students learning grade-level curriculum, three out of the four teachers interviewed said they felt that their students should take part in some assessment. Although they did not necessarily feel that the New York State Alternate Assessment was appropriate for their students, they felt some form of assessment was important for accountability purposes.

The need for teacher training is one topic that was commonly examined in prior research. The findings of the current study suggest that almost all of the participants felt that the amount of alternate assessment training they have received is ample. This result

is inconsistent with prior research. Numerous alternate assessment studies (Browder et al., 2005; Flowers et al., 2005; Kampfer et al., 2001; Perner, 2007; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009) have stressed the need for more teacher training in regards to alternate assessments in order for success.

Since IDEA (1997) made it a requirement that state alternate assessments be aligned with state content standards, states are obligated to assess students with severe disabilities on subjects like math, science or reading regardless of their disabilities. However, through the interviews conducted in the current study it was demonstrated that most teachers are not basing their lessons around state standards. A few of the teachers even explained that they do not always know how to integrate that material into their daily lessons or felt that it was necessary. This finding supports the need for more teacher training on how to include alternate assessment content into all classrooms. Future research should include an investigation into the best ways for teachers to teach academics to students with severe disabilities.

One possible reason for the results of the current study being inconsistent with prior studies could involve a limitation with a data collection method. In the survey question involving training the question was phrased “have you had adequate training in regards to the New York State Alternate Assessment.” The phrasing of this question may have cause a skew in the data. Although the results of the survey showed that 21 out of 22 teachers felt that they have received an adequate amount of training in regards to the alternate assessment the participants may have felt differently if asked about the amount of training received in regards to integrating into their daily classroom. Also, the link for the survey was sent via email from the person in charge of training for the New York

State Alternate Assessment at one of the schools. Although a consent form was attached with the email stating that responses would not be shared with anyone but the researcher and would not be traceable back to the participant, this may have affected participant responses.

Another possible limitation of the current study that may form a threat to the external validity involves the selection of the participants. As mentioned prior, the participants used in the current study were considered a convenience sample. Teacher responses may have been biased in some way considering they work closely and have a personal relationship with the researcher. Also, the interviewed teachers were not chosen at random. The teachers to be interviewed were hand selected by the researcher in an attempt to obtain the opinions of teachers in multiple classroom types. Different results may have been obtained if other teachers were interviewed. The current study is also considered quantitative and qualitative. The opinions of the interviewed teachers were interpreted by the researcher. The researcher chose conceived common themes to pull out to discuss in the current study.

Another point of focus of prior research was the amount of influence alternate assessments have on IEP development. Prior research (Browder et al., 2005; Kleinert et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2001; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009) has stressed the importance of standards based IEPs when looking to achieve student success with an alternate assessment. If a student's IEP is "the cornerstone of the program for every student with disabilities" (Kleinert, 2002, p.41) it is important that teachers see the link between the alternate assessment and a student's IEP. The results of the current study suggest that participants do not see the link between the two. Twenty-two out of twenty-

two teachers surveyed reported that the New York State Alternate Assessment has little to no affect on IEP development. Three out of the four teachers interviewed specifically said that they felt that the results of the Alternate Assessment have no affect on IEP development. These results may imply that the majority of the teachers from these three New York schools see no connection between the Alternate Assessment and their students' educational plans. If IEP's do not include any information pertaining to the assessment it becomes obvious that teachers may feel that the alternate assessment has little if any impact on IEP development. In order to address this problem, New York State may want to look into requiring content standards on all IEPs.

One of the main focuses of prior research on alternate assessments and the current study was the amount of influence the assessment has on instructional planning. As you may recall, prior research (Browder et al., 2003; Kampfer et al., 2001; Kleinert et al., 2002) has demonstrated the importance of incorporating the assessment material in with daily instruction. The results of the current study are inconsistent with the results of a prior study by Towles-Reeves and Kleinert (2003). Towles-Reeves and Kleinert found that 44.4% of teachers felt that the alternate assessment had a positive influence on daily instruction. Flowers et al. (2005) also found that 36% of teachers using the portfolio format reported that the alternate assessment improved instruction. The results of the current study suggest that a very small number of participants felt that the Alternate Assessment has any influence on daily instruction. There were 19 out of 22 teachers surveyed that said the New York State Alternate Assessment had either a small amount or no influence on daily instruction. This result was somewhat consistent with teacher

responses to interview questions. Two of the four teachers interviewed said that they felt that the assessment has no affect on their daily instruction.

Although prior research has shown that teachers felt the alternate assessment has had a positive influence on daily instruction, percentages have yet to surpass even 50%. Towles-Reeves and Kleinert reported that the number of teachers who felt that the alternate assessments have had no influence on daily instruction (38.7%) was almost matched to the number who reported a positive influence on daily instruction (44.4%). The current study supports the idea that all teachers are not seeing an improvement in daily instruction from the results of alternate assessments. The results of survey question number nine in the current study show that 17 out of the 22 teachers surveyed felt that the New York State Alternate Assessment is not beneficial at all to their students. A number of the participants in the current study, like teacher number eleven in question ten on the survey, felt that the assessment process is “just another task that needs to be completed with students and we move on with our day.”

One key implication of the current study is that New York State still has some improvising to do before a completely validated alternate assessment is created. Results from all four interviews demonstrated that teachers felt that the assessment is not appropriate for all of their students. New York State needs to look at the needs of students with severe cognitive disabilities and recognize the variability among this population. The state’s attempt at accommodating for this variability by offering tasks at different difficulty levels is just not enough. Developing an assessment that is for students with different instructional needs from typical students can be rather difficult. Alternate assessments need to include functional skills and curriculum so that it is

applicable to all students with disabilities. If the education system wants to use an alternate assessment to make sure that all students are receiving the education that they should be, the education system should first look at what the education of a student with severe disabilities actually looks like. The content of the exam is what should be reexamined. Different versions of the exam could be developed depending on student abilities and goals. New York State may want to look at the way other states administer their alternate assessments. Browder et al. (2005) found that one state had two forms of an alternate assessment. One assessment extended the state's standards and the other contained only functional skills. Also, the researchers found that one state allowed the IEP teams to determine the specific scaling of the rubrics for the assessments. Future research could involve examining the differences in the results of the assessment and teacher perceptions of the assessment between a state like New York and a state that has two forms of the assessment.

Another suggestion for New York State to help the alternate assessment to fulfill its purpose is to reevaluate the way results and feedback are sent back to teachers. The majority of the teachers in the current study found little or no beneficial information from the feedback they received. Instruction cannot be improved if teachers do not fully understand what was done correctly or incorrectly. The New York State Education Department needs to devise new ways of getting teachers useful feedback in order to help drive programming and instruction.

Test developers might also want to take a look at the format of the assessment. The NYSAA now relies heavily on a teacher's ability to assemble a portfolio. A new assessment needs to be developed that reflects more of the student's capabilities rather

than the teachers. The results of prior research and the current study are consistent in this area. Prior research (Johnson & Arnold, 2007; Flowers et al., 2005; Johnson & Arnold, 2004; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009) has shown that the majority of teachers felt that it is the teacher who is being assessed on their ability to assemble the assessment.

Participants in the current study expressed their frustration in question ten on the survey and during the interviews about the results of the assessments not being an accurate portraying of what their students can actually do. The appearance of a portfolio or a teacher's inability to choose a fitting assessment task should not reflect on a students' grade. Future research might look at the best ways to assess students with severe cognitive disabilities in a way that can help influence daily instruction.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions on SurveyMonkey.com

1.) Which of the following best describes your classroom?

Preacademic

Academic

Preemergent

Functional daily living skills based

2.) Which of the following best describes the age range of your students?

Younger than 9

9 – 12

12 – 15

15 – 18

Older than 18

3.) Do you have previous experience with administering the NYS Alternate Assessment?

Yes

No

4.) Do you feel that you have had adequate training in regards to the alternate assessment?

Yes

No

Don't Know

5.) How much of an influence, if any, do you feel that the alternate assessment has on instructional planning?

A large influence

Some influence

A small amount of influence

No influence

- 6.) How much of an influence, if any, do you feel that the Alternate Assessment has on IEP development?

A large influence

Some influence

A small amount of influence

No influence

- 7.) State your agreement or disagreement with the following statement.

I feel that it is important for students with significant cognitive disabilities to learn academics through grade-level curriculum.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Don't Know

Agree

Strongly Agree

- 8.) State your agreement or disagreement with the following statement.

The NYS Alternate Assessment provides me with very little beneficial information as a teacher.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Don't Know

Agree

Strongly Agree

- 9.) Do you feel that the Alternate Assessment is beneficial to your students?

Yes

No

Don't Know

- 10.) What are some changes that you would make to the Alternate Assessment if you could?

Appendix B

Interviewee

Interview Questions

- 1.) How would you classify your daily lesson plans? (Functional or Academic skills)

- 2.) Have you ever administered that NYS Alternate Assessment before?

- 3.) Do you feel that the Alternate Assessment has an affect on your instructional planning? How?

- 4.) Do you feel that your daily instruction prepares your students for the material on the Alternate Assessment?

- 5.) How do the results of your students' Alternate Assessments effect instruction, IEP development, planning?

6.) Do you feel that your students should be taking the Alternate Assessment? Why or why not?

7.) What would the Alternate Assessment look like if you designed it?

Appendix C – Interview consent form

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

The purpose of this research project is to examine special education teachers' opinions of the New York State Alternate Assessment. The areas that will be studied include the influence the New York State Alternate Assessment has on instructional planning, and the pros and cons of the assessment itself. This research project is also being conducted in order for me to complete my master's thesis for the Department of Education and Human Development at the State University of New York College at Brockport.

In order to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in the project. If you want to participate in the project, and agree with the statements below, your completion of the survey and/or interview signifies your consent. You may change your mind at any time and leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. My name will not be associated to interview responses. There will be no way to connect me to my interview responses. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name.
3. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of my participation in this project.
4. My participation involves answering seven interview questions.
5. Approximately 4 people will take part in interview portion. The results will be used for the completion of a master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the survey process. Returning the survey (and/or completing interview if appropriate) indicates my consent to participate.

If you have any questions you may contact:

Primary researcher	Faculty Advisor
Jennifer Barrett	Dr. Conrad Van Voorst

585-201-6041	Department of Education and Human Development 585-395-5019
Jbarrett7459@yahoo.com	Cvanvoor@brockport.edu

Appendix D – Survey consent form

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I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. My name will not be associated to survey responses. There will be no way to connect me to my survey responses. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name.
3. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of my participation in this project.
4. My participation involves answering ten survey questions.
5. Approximately twenty-two teachers from three schools will take part in survey portion. The results will be used for the completion of a master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the survey process. Returning the survey (and/or completing interview if appropriate) indicates my consent to participate.

If you have any questions you may contact:

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